



National Center on Fathers and Families

# BRIEF

*NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. This Brief, Social Fatherhood: Conceptualizations, Compelling Research, and Future Directions, written by Randal D. Day of Washington State University, is one in a series of NCOFF's working papers designed to expand work in understudied areas. Copies of commissioned papers or other NCOFF reports are available from NCOFF in paper form or on diskette.*

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## Social Fatherhood: Conceptualizations, Compelling Research, and Future Directions

### Key Findings

- Social fathers are a significant and viable resource in children's lives. Attention should be placed on men (regardless of their biological contribution to the child) who have a significant relationship with a child. These social fathers potentially have a significant and relatively permanent social/emotional connection with the child and this association exists regardless of biological or even legal ties to the child.
- Scholars, private and government funding agencies, policymakers, and practitioners have converged on the notion that understanding more about fatherhood is an essential key in unlocking such problems as children in poverty and high crime rates among adolescents.
- During the past thirty years, our assumptions about who fathers are and what they contribute to child well-being has changed dramatically.
- There are two central constructs that drive much of the research on fathering. The first is labeled "paternity establishment" and is often used in research about fatherhood and teen pregnancy, child economic well-being, and issues of custody. The second is the idea that fathering constitutes more than just presence but *interaction, accessibility, and responsibility*.
- Further, researchers are proposing that father responsibility includes more than time allocation spent in a role, than his presence, or than his emotional connection to the child. Responsibility includes motivational factors associated with active positive paternal involvement.
- There are a variety of contexts within which men enact the role of social fatherhood. These contexts are a mixture of structural, ethnic, gender, community, and life-course issues that direct his motivations and how he enacts the fathering role.
- One of the key questions that fatherhood scholars wish to know more about is why a man chooses (or does not choose) to participate in the biological creation of a child and, once the child is born, why he decides to continue his contact with the mother and child. Further, why would he choose to continue (or not continue) that contact and invest in those relationships when the turbulence and trouble of family life arise.
- The concept of role enactment is meant to define how one takes the expectations of a particular role and then fulfills (or does not fulfill) that role in an efficacious way. Once he is motivated to participate in the role of fathering he then chooses (or declines) to provide, teach morals, nurture, and protect.

- It is becoming clear to researchers that to understand the engagement, enactment, and involvement of fathers one must understand the nature of dyadic and triadic relationships that exist within a family “behind closed doors.” Family process informs us about how family members think, feel, and act toward each other. Several family process variables of interest are: flexibility, distance regulation, monitoring, and caring.

### ***Recommendations for Research***

- Researchers and practitioners should continue their theory building efforts that expand our understanding of men’s role as social fathers.
- More research and theory needs to be facilitated which assists us in understanding how men perceived the key aspects of the role of social father.
- More research and theory building efforts are needed to better understand the intricacies of the enactment of the social fathering role. In particular, more information is needed about effective ways men can specifically influence the well-being of children.
- The role of family processes in fatherhood research is virtually untapped. When considering the multiplicity of dyad relationships in a family, very little is known about differences in gender of parent with regard to issues of family flexibility, caring, distance regulation, effective communication, and effective parent-child interactional strategies.

## **Social Fatherhood: Conceptualizations, Compelling Research, and Future Directions**

The research on social fatherhood is complex, compelling, and vital to our understanding of family well-being. It is especially pertinent to the study of well-being in children. Initially, researchers used a simple explanatory model attempting to associate paternal presence/absence with isolated child outcomes. More recently, researchers and theorists have considered fathers’ motivations, contexts, involvement, and enactment of the paternal role with greater complexity. The author of this review attempts to provide a historical overview of research on fathering, then trace new directions in “social fatherhood” research, which views positive father involvement as a much more complex construct. For example, social fatherhood addresses the contexts of interaction, fathers’ motivations, and the mechanisms of enactment, such foci of study represent a departure from the more traditional, two variable model (i.e., father absence has a negative influence on children, and father presence is equivalent to effective fathering). Finally, the author presents several important research findings, as well as a series of research questions which propose future research directions. He places particular emphasis on the need for more theory development and longitudinal research on African American fathering, the ways in which fathers’ motivations change over the life cycle, and whether a “father template” exists which defines whether or not fathers’ contributions within families are unique.

This Brief is divided into four primary sections. The first presents an historical overview of social fatherhood

research. The second details research on contexts and motivations for fatherhood. The third outlines new research into factors that affect fathers’ enactment and involvement. The fourth and final section draws conclusions about the existing research in the area of social fatherhood, and highlights gaps in that research, directions for research, and the need for future studies.

### **An Historical Overview of “Social Fatherhood” Research**

The author of the paper states that in recent years, researchers and practitioners have generated many ways of defining father involvement. He cites the argument that biological fathers have more potential to make significant contributions to their children’s well-being than a stepfather, male family member, or role model. Those who propose this approach argue that the United States is at high risk because there are so many biological fathers who have abandoned their children and have been replaced by men who do not have the same ability to impact a child’s life. Other researchers have suggested that social fathers are often a significant and valuable resource in children’s lives, and that a man’s social/emotional connection to a child is more critical to a child’s well-being than his biological connection. The author maintains that there is no clear evidence that the biological father can contribute to the well-being of a child in a way that a non-biological father cannot.

Day then traces the emerging research emphasis on social fatherhood, from the bifurcated father presence/absence models of families prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s to the more complex attempts to paint a larger picture of what father involvement means. Researchers in the mid-1980s and 1990s began to suggest that fathering involves more than just presence but *interaction, accessibility, and responsibility*. Researchers now question what it is that fathers do to create positive and efficacious relationships with children resulting in enhanced child well-being. A new group of important studies emerged, confirming that children with highly engaged fathers have more cognitive competence, better self-monitoring and self-esteem, and better locus of control results. Children with more than one highly involved parent were found to be more likely to develop sex-stereotypic role behavior and better problem-solving skills. However, other studies make the case that presence or even involvement of a second parent is not as important as the attitude and quality of existing family interactions, and that children suffer when there is hostility and conflict in the family.

#### References:

Amato, 1993; Amato and Keith, 1991; Biller, 1974; Blankenhorn, 1995, p.10; Herzog & Sudia, 1973; William Marsiglio, 1998, 1981, 1993; Lamb, Pleck & Levine, 1985; Lamb, 1997; Palkovitz, 1997; Marsiglio, 1997; Committee on Conceptualizing Male Parenting, 1997; Radin, 1994.

#### Contexts and Motivations for Father Involvement

There are a variety of contexts within which men enact the role of social fatherhood. These contexts include a mixture of structural, ethnic, gender, community, and life-course factors that direct the father's motivations and how he enacts the fathering role. One of the most significant contexts that needs to be addressed is the change in what we think of as a family unit.

The author cites research on the structural changes (e.g., divorce, re-marriage, etc.) that occur within families, and the contexts in which fathering is affected by these changes. A father is more likely to make the choice to enact the father role in more efficacious ways when he perceives that his role is central and important relative to other role commitments, if the significant others in his world encourage the continuance of that role, if his father role is enmeshed with other identities (e.g., religion), and if he perceives that the rewards of continued enactment outweigh the costs.

The author reminds us that fatherhood is not enacted in a socio-cultural vacuum. The context of race/ethnicity and family structure are inextricably tied to economic issues which affect family life. For example, high rates of unemployment among African American fathers coupled with lower educational standings and earlier age at first intercourse help create long-term poverty situations for a vast proportion of African American children. Cultural contexts are highlighted in a study which illuminates differences between how fatherhood is constructed in Japan versus the U.S. Gender differences are addressed as an important research topic (e.g., are there attributes, skills or knowledge that only a male can bring to the parenting mix?).

In addition, life course changes which affect the ways in which the fathering role evolves represent an area lacking adequate research.

The motivations for fatherhood are as complex as the contexts within which fatherhood is enacted. Genetic propensities, a father's relationship with his own father, and economic factors are examined as phenomena that provide incentives — or disincentives — for fathering.

#### References:

Arditti, 1991; Becker, 1960, 1961; Day, 1995; Day, Gilbert, Settles, and Burr, 1995; Day & Mackey, 1989; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley and Buelher, 1993; Ishii-Kuntz, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995; Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992a; 1992b; 1995; Lamb, 1997; Mackey, 1985; McLanahan & Booth, 1988; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Willis, 1973; Willis and Weiss, 1985, 1993, 1996.

#### New Research Into Factors Affecting Enactment and Involvement

The author highlights studies which have moved from simply counting "hours spent" to measuring the quality and substance of parent-child interactions. Emerging theoretical work on social capital suggest that the resources fathers control and expose their children to significantly influence child well-being. One study suggests that family resources can be divided into human, financial, and social capital. Generally, social capital refers to the relationships between and among family members and the community that have beneficial effects on a child's emotional, educational, cognitive, and social development. Another emerging area of research the author focuses on is family process research, which describes the ongoing dynamics of interaction found within the family unit. Within the body of family processes research, two themes emerge which the author discusses in-depth: (1) distance regulation and (2) flexibility. Distance regulation is defined as the amount of individuality and the amount of intimacy that are tolerated within a family system. Flexibility refers to the adaptability, problem-solving ability and coping styles that families employ in response to internal and external demands for change. While few studies guided by family process theories have focused specifically on the father's role, the above areas of research promise to enlarge our understanding of paternal involvement and the enactment of the father role.

#### References:

Lamb, Pleck, Rodin, McBride; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Becker, 1991; Foa, 1971; Amato, 1997; committee on Father Involvement, 1997; Gavazzi, 1993; Anderson & Gavazzi, 1990.

#### Conclusions and New Research Directions

The research on social fatherhood is complex, compelling and vital to our understanding of family well-being. More recently, researchers and theorists have

considered fathers' motivations, contexts, involvement and enactment of the paternal role with greater complexity. Unfortunately, the collection of data to fill out this amplified theoretical model of fatherhood is limited. The author raises a call for research into fatherhood in African American urban communities and into the relationship between men's motivations and the enactment of the fathering role. He also poses questions about how those motivations may change over the life cycle, vary by subculture, and be expressed in family structural conditions.

There are further questions which require careful future research to be properly answered, such as: Is there a parenting template that both parents must achieve if effective parenting is to occur? Does that template differ for mothers and fathers? What, specifically, are the barriers that preclude men from being in children's lives? Research in the field of family processes also needs to be increased in order to better understand the role human, social, and financial capital in child well-being. Two additional areas of inquiry involve: (1) family process research on adolescents and fathers and (2) the child-father dynamic for among teenage fathers.

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